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Emergency Preparedness

Guidelines for Alberta Schools

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FOREWORD

The best way to minimize the impact of emergencies in our schools is to plan ahead. Approximately 25% of Alberta's citizens spend a considerable part of their time studying or working at school. This publication serves their security and welfare. It outlines measures to prepare for school emergencies.

All Albertans have a responsibility to promote safety and security, and to take measures to reduce potential injury, death and property damage.

We urge you to use this resource document as the first step in implementing an emergency plan for the safety and security of your students and staff.

J. Dinning
Minister of Education

R. Speaker
Minister of Public Safety Services

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Emergency Prepareness - Guidelines for Alberta Schools is jointly published by Alberta Public Safety Services and the Department of Education. Much of the material in these guidelines is a synthesis of material adopted from Manitoba and Ontario's versions. We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the Manitoba Emergency Measures Organization, the Manitoba Department of Education, the Ontario Ministry of the Solicitor General and the Ontario Ministry of Education in making their material on emergency planning in schools available.

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EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS GUIDELINES FOR ALBERTA SCHOOLS

These guidelines have been prepared to provide assistance and encouragement to local school jurisdictions in the development and implementation of a local emergency preparedness program. Final responsibility for decisions related to school emergency programs remains with local school boards. Professional advice and assistance in all aspects of emergency preparedness is available from Alberta Public Safety Services.

Emergency Preparedness

Emergency preparedness should be approached as a continuing activity. Initially, it is necessary to identify the types of hazards that may threaten a school and prepare basic plans to mitigate their effects. Once this has been accomplished there will be a continuing need to update plans, educate emergency responders and rehearse planned responses.

The immediate physical safety of students and staff must take priority during an emergency. Security of the school is a secondary consideration. A comprehensive plan will encompass sheltering for protection, evacuation of the premises, first aid and the continued care of students until they can safely return home. Students must be taught proper procedures to follow in an emergency and be trained to participate in the specific plan for their school.

An effective emergency preparedness program will include an educational package that extends to students, their parents/guardians and all staff members. It should provide students with an opportunity to study and understand the various types of emergencies that could affect their school or community. It is also important to involve parents/guardians in the school plan and communicate the need for their understanding and support in its implementation.

A suggested allocation of emergency preparedness responsibilities and functions for school authorities is outlined in APPENDIX I.

THE EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS PROGRAM

The first step in establishing a program is the development of an appropriate School Board policy. It is suggested that a team of elected officials and staff be designated to complete this task through the formation of an Emergency Preparedness Committee.

This committee should develop the training and education components of the program and should assist in the development of school emergency plans by providing local guidelines and a format for the preparation of individual school emergency plans.

One person at each school should be responsible for the development of the school emergency plan. Following review and approval of the plan by the Board, this individual would also be responsible for its implementation.

Response Organization and Control

It is anticipated that each school division or district has participated to some degree in the development of an overall municipal strategy for emergency response. Preparation or expansion of existing emergency preparedness plans by or for individual schools should be similarly incorporated into the overall municipal strategy. During an emergency, a School Board's response must be integrated with the powers granted to local authorities under the Public Safety Services Act.

At the school level, the principal, staff, teacher and student relationship is well suited to the needs of the emergency response and control structure. Therefore, every effort should be made to utilize existing organizations and procedures. The exercise of emergency responsibilities should be considered an extension of day-to-day responsibilities.

Specific duties should be assigned to each member of the staff. These responsibilities should be allocated with regard for each individual's specific abilities and normal sphere of work. Individual assignments might include transportation co-ordinator, information and media co-ordinator, and liaison with the local Director of Disaster Services.

An emergency control centre should be designated, equipped and maintained in a state of immediate readiness for an emergency. Its location should be well known to staff and students.

School Closing and Reopening

Emergency school closing procedures should be established and approved by School Boards. Their implementation should be co-ordinated by Superintendents. Such procedures should be shown in an appendix to the plan.

The reopening of schools should be considered only after there is assurance that the emergency or potential emergency has ended.

Announcements concerning the emergency closing and subsequent reopening of schools should be disseminated to the public by use of the electronic media. These procedures should also be shown in an appendix to the plan.

Communication/Warning

The existing school communication system will normally be adequate for emergency purposes. A communication instruction should be developed and made known to staff and students so that they will know what immediate actions are to be taken when warning signals and messages are heard. The system must be capable of reaching all parts of the school and grounds.

In the event of power failure or loss of the internal communications system, alternative arrangements such as personal contact between control staff and teachers; the use of loud hailers; or other methods of maintaining contact between levels of authority should be established. The details of both primary and alternate communication arrangements should also appear in the plan.

Shelter/Evacuation/Dispersal

Sheltering in safe areas of the school, evacuation to a different facility or the deliberate dispersal of students to their homes are some of the protective actions that should be addressed in any plan. The circumstances under which one or more of the protective actions may have to be undertaken will vary with the type of threat. Nevertheless, a single emergency plan which presents a range of alternatives will normally suffice.

If the situation permits, it is considered desirable to disperse children to their homes. Planning should include a telephone fan-out system for contacting parents/guardians and alternate arrangements for the provision of continuing care for pupils whose parents/guardians are not at home. An example of a telephone fan-out system for communicating with parents is contained in APPENDIX II.

The available warning time could restrict the range of options that could be exercised. For example, given a tornado warning, it probably would be necessary to take shelter in the school. On the other hand flood warnings normally would provide ample time to evacuate schools in the potential flood path. Every school should therefore make plans for sheltering, evacuating and/or dispersing students and staff using the following simple steps:

a) Survey the school and identify safe areas for sheltering against the threat of sudden, severe storms;

b) Survey other schools and buildings taking particular note of those that offer meal and accommodation facilities for long term care of pupils;

c) Select and map out areas for sheltering and/or evacuation. Develop plans and arrangements for the use of alternate facilities;

d) Develop shelter and evacuation procedures, assign groups to shelter/evacuation areas;

e) Develop dispersal plans for dealing with longer term or forecast emergencies when pupils may have to be returned to their homes.

Note: Most communities have identified reception/shelter areas in existing municipal emergency response plans. This information should be included in individual school plans.

Transport

Transport arrangements should provide for the continued availability of school buses or other transport during periods when severe weather or other potential emergencies could threaten. Arrangements may also vary according to season, as warm weather periods may allow more flexibility in determining how groups may travel.

Other community sources of public, private and commercial road transport should be surveyed and appropriate arrangements put in place to ensure their timely availability in an emergency. The need for special transportation facilities for groups who have special needs should not be overlooked.

Health/First Aid

Basic procedures for obtaining emergency health and first aid assistance should be investigated and published so that they are well understood by staff. In locations which are more remote from sources of immediate assistance, it may be necessary to institute a first aid training program.

Maps/diagrams

Maps and/or diagrams, attached as appendices to the plan can be extremely useful for illustrating details of the plan, for example:

- the school's emergency response structure and communication system
- warning/reporting procedures
- location of shelter and evacuation areas
- evacuation routes

Emergency Contact List

A list of key emergency response personnel and resource contacts or agencies which provides both business and home telephone numbers is recommended as an appendix to the plan. Such a list can be readily amended and updated without affecting the basic plan.

Coordination with Community Plan

School plans should be coordinated with those of the communities in which the schools are located. This is particularly important since the initial warning may emanate from outside the schools and may affect all or a portion of the community as well. There should be detailed coordination for the use of the limited emergency services and other resources that would have to serve the needs of the schools and the community alike. Communities may depend upon the use of school facilities for certain types of emergency response.

Emergency Plan Format

There is no single plan format that is considered to be the final answer for school emergency planning requirements. However, use of a common format by all schools within a given school division or district can ease the plan coordination and approval process. A suggested format is outlined in APPENDIX III. This outline is not intended to be definitive model, but should serve as an illustration of the types of planning detail and information that may be included in a school emergency plan.

TRAINING AND EDUCATION PROGRAM

Training Program

School staff should be trained to perform their assigned general or specific tasks within the emergency plan. First aid training should be provided for all staff and cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR) training should be provided to selected personnel. Organizations such as the Red Cross and St. John Ambulance are available to provide information and assistance in arranging and implementing training programs.

The implementation of the emergency plan, either in an actual emergency or in a drill or exercise, is the single best way to train personnel in emergency response functions. A program of drills and exercises should begin with limited objectives and graduate progressively over a period of time to a full scale exercise involving all participants.

Education Program

Just as the emergency planning and training program should be an ongoing activity of the school, an emergency education program should also be incorporated as part of the school curriculum. The following subjects are considered to be informative and related to the emergency preparedness program:

a. Natural emergencies such as floods, forest fires, tornadoes, snowstorms and epidemics.

b. Man-made emergencies such as structural fires, explosions, dangerous goods accidents, and road, rail and aircraft accidents.

c. Protective measures to mitigate the effects of emergencies and disasters.

d. Meteorology and weather warning systems.

e. Peaceful uses of nuclear energy and radioactive materials.

f. Fire prevention and the chemistry of fire extinguishing.

g. Community organizations responsible for health and safety - fire, police, health, ambulance and public utilities.

h. The community emergency response plan.

Any or all of these topics could be addressed as part of Health, Career and Life Management, Physical Education, Science or Social Studies programs at appropriate grade levels, or addressed during a general assembly.

Presentations or information/training sessions for students might also be arranged with local Red Cross, St. John's Ambulance or other qualified emergency response groups.

Alberta Public Safety Services can provide, or arrange for the provision of information and assistance in implementing an emergency education program.

ASSESSMENT OF EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS

A school emergency preparedness program can only be evaluated by the effectiveness with which it accomplishes its purpose. Emergency plans should be put into operation and tested under circumstances simulating different types of emergency situations that are likely to arise. The education program should include, where feasible, tests or quizzes to reinforce knowledge about emergencies and what can be done to mitigate their effects.

The evaluation of these programs will indicate if changes are required in plans, and what additional training and education is necessary to increase the overall standard of emergency preparedness.

PUBLIC INFORMATION

Parents and teachers should be informed of the necessity for emergency preparedness.

When all those directly connected with the school (i.e. administrators, teachers, parents/guardians and pupils) have been familiarized with the aims and methods of the program, they can help to obtain the support of the community. Specific information should be sent home to acquaint parents with the progress of the school program for safe-guarding their children. A suggested letter to provide this information can be found in APPENDIX IV.

Parent-teacher meetings, radio and television programs can also be used to inform parents. Parents should be kept well informed to ensure public confidence in the school's emergency preparedness program.

The public relations benefits of the school emergency preparedness program are many. Parents will be relieved to know that plans exist to provide their children with the highest possible degree of protection and that it is neither advisable nor necessary for them to rush to the school when warnings sound. Teachers will also find that in this, as well as in other school programs, parents can make a valuable contribution if they are kept informed.

CONCLUSION

When an emergency preparedness program is presented as a continuing community activity, its significance as part of everyday living will become evident and young people will begin to understand why they must continue to be concerned with this issue.

Children who develop an awareness of the value in being prepared for emergencies are more likely to meet them calmly and realistically. Furthermore, their influence in family groups can have a highly beneficial impact on the overall emergency preparedness of the community.